

Detroit Free Press

10/24/95

Stolen Clinton plan now a GOP deformity

The chief trouble with the Republican Medicare plan is that it will not work. It won't save Medicare; it will create a horrible mess.

Many of us on the liberal side started out with sympathy for the GOP plan. It is actually the Clinton health care plan under another name — in other words, managed care.

This sent many Democrats screaming about irony and hypocrisy. One feels tempted to pat their collective shoulder and say: "There, there, dear; if you can't take a little irony and hypocrisy — in fact, if you can't take irony and hypocrisy up to your eyeteeth — you'd best get out of this particular kitchen called politics."

I'm sure Hillary Rodham Clinton, a real grownup, was flattered to hear her plan, which was attacked without mercy last year, praised to the skies by those same Republicans this year. Not only do the R's deserve credit for taking on one of the untouchables among government programs, one that clearly needs reform, but they even had the guts to suggest that wealthy older people pay more for Medicare — a practically Marxist notion, by their standards.

The original Republican plan also had some very bad ideas, including the cutting of Medicare by almost two-thirds more than necessary, to finance tax cuts for the rich. But it did have the basis for intelligent compromise. If Republicans were in the habit of sitting down to work on their proposals with an open mind, holding broad hearings, and listening carefully to suggestions for improvement, something worthwhile might have come of all this.

But Republicans who screamed mightily about the first lady's "secret meetings" last year produced instead a meaningless, four-page plan, and then proceeded to work out the details in secret and ram the plan through a month

later. Not without changes, but all of them for the worse.

The chief goal of the Clinton plan was universal health care coverage, the principle that no one should go without. It left Medicare in place for those over 65. The Republican plan reverses this, putting managed care in place for those over 65, but not for everyone over 65.

Those who would be left out of the managed-care part of the plan are the oldest and sickest of the elderly and those with preexisting conditions. Those seniors will be left in a Medicare plan with soaring costs and worse care, as a result of the astonishingly dumb Republican sellouts to the doctors and nursing homes.

The chief drawback of managed care is that it offers no choice of doctors and hospitals. For that reason, it was loudly decried by last year's Republicans. There have been some breathtaking, brain-spraining moments of late, as when House Speaker Newt Gingrich accused Democrats of "frightening old people" by pointing out that managed care kills "choice."

The weakest part of the Republican plan is cost control. All these reforms were set in motion to stop Medicare costs from mushrooming. But the secretly negotiated, last-minute Republican deal with the American Medical Association obliterated that goal.

Allowing doctors to own all or part of medical labs has the most amazing effect. It causes them to prescribe more and higher-priced tests, with the inevitability of a patella jerking in response to a rubber hammer.

The AMA deal also protects doctors from other cost savings. The modest increase in premiums will not begin to cover these costs.

Nursing homes, however, will save money. The GOP plan rolls back many of the regulations that gradually have brought nursing homes out of the age of snake pits and horror stories.

The Republican plan will hit urban hospitals particularly hard. If projected savings from putting seniors into managed care plans do not materialize, the bill mandates additional cuts for doctors and hospitals. The most likely effect would be to drive doctors away from serving Medicare patients.

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11-2-95

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10/24/95

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